DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 440 453 EA 030 364

AUTHOR	McKenna, Marian J.
TITLE	Academic Service Learning and Collaborative Action Research: Two Roads to Educational Reform.
SPONS AGENCY	Corporation for National Service.; American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	1999-00-00
NOTE	10p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Citizenship Education; *Educational Cooperation; Higher Education; *Middle School Students; Middle Schools; *Professional Development; *School Community Programs; *Service Learning; Student Participation; *Teacher Collaboration; Work Experience Programs

ABSTRACT

This article offers a preliminary report of the first 2 years of a 3-year partnership between a university faculty member and a public middle-school teacher. The partnership was guided by four questions: How does academic service learning transform curricular delivery and the critical identity of teacher as a professional? What is the impact of academic service learning on the interactions between students and community members? How can classroom action research support collegiality and professional development? and How do academic service learning and collaborative action research influence the creation of democratic communities? The study is based on a project in which the middle-school teacher, in collaboration with the university educator, applied the principles of academic service learning by leading her Technical Arts students in the construction of a community-built playground. Early results of the partnership show that the transformation of curricular delivery and the critical identity of the teacher as a professional can be profound. The work served to engage the students since the project was easily seen as relevant and immediately applicable. Furthermore, students were able to interact in meaningful ways with adults who were not their parents or teachers. The project supported the collegiality and professional development of all professional participants. (RJM)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 440 453

Academic Service Learning and Collaborative Action research: Two Roads to Educational Reform.

Running Head: Two Roads

Marian J McKenna, Ph.D.
School of Education
The University of Montana
Missoula, Montana 59812
406-243-4915
mjm@selway.umt.edu

Paper submitted to the editors of *Academic Exchange Quarterly* for consideration for publication in the themed service learning issue.

**Note to editors: Photographs and samples of other artifacts can be scanned into the text if so desired.

This research was supported in part by a grant from AACTE and the Corporation for National Service.

EA 030364

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Thought is the blossom, language the bud, action the fruit behind it.
Ralph Waldo Emerson

Introduction

The morning headline of the local paper reads: "Community-built playground to open Wednesday." Underneath this headline is a picture of a beautiful playground of turrets and bridges, sandpits and monkey bars. Children and adults alike peer and point over the fence at structures and areas they have helped to create.

The event was the result of one middle school teacher's enormous efforts to procure a site, materials, expertise, builders, and to teach her Technical Arts students in the best way she knew—by having them build something. This teacher is a graduate student at the local university working on her master's degree in Literacy Education. It was here that she learned about academic service learning as a pedagogy and acquired initial funding for her playground project.

This powerful illustration is just one example of how the combination of academic service learning, collaborative action research, and master teachers can come together to impact some of the most profound issues we face in educational reform: strong and relevant pedagogy, engaged students, professionalism of educators, and the interaction of the school community and its home community. The following article is a preliminary report of the first two years of a three-year partnership between a university

faculty member and a public middle school teacher. This is a partnership that has born 'blossom, bud, and fruit'.

Theoretical Framework

Research was conducted to investigate the impact service learning principles and practices have on the learning environment and the community, through collaborative action research. Service learning is fast becoming a critical pedagogical method in curricular delivery. This philosophy lends itself to teacher-student-community collaboration, the fostering of higher order thinking skills, relevance to the curriculum taught, and the democratization of the school climate. Essential components to a service learning program include: adequate planning and preparation, a curricular link, the service provided meets a real community need, and structured reflection exercises which demonstrate intended learning outcomes. The integration of service into the public schools goes back to Dewey, but has returned to the educational arena out a concern for the social, psychological, and intellectual development of our youth. (Wade, 1997). Data was collected using a qualitative research paradigm with the triangulation of student and community interviews, showcase portfolios and community based photographs. Throughout this project, we sought to define, examine, and reflect upon educational experiences from the perspective of university faculty members, K-12 participants, and community partners. From this examination, we seek to converge on a true understanding of the interaction of collaborative action research and academic service learning for sustainable educational reform. The vehicle for promoting this research was

a naturally occurring relationship between a university faculty member and a middle school teacher in the local community. As we discovered our mutual interest in academic service learning, we sought to expand the parameters of our understanding and compare our experiences of conducting academic service learning with our respective students and then as a collaborative action research project. The marriage of the two educational practices of academic service learning and collaborative action research is a very natural one. As a pedagogy and process of inquiry academic service learning and collaborative action research conspire to allow a complex set of issues and actions to be examined within their natural setting. Consider a partial definition of *practitioner research* as given by Anderson, G.L., Herr, K. & Nihlen, A.S. (1994):

> Practitioner research has the potential for empowerment and the inclusion of a greater diversity of voices in educational policy and social change. We see practitioner research as an opportunity to make the voices of those who work closest to the classroom be heard. This includes not only those practitioners who work at school sites, but also the students who study there and the people who live in the school's community. (p.6).

Research Focus

The following inquiries were the foci of our exploration:

- What is the impact of academic service learning in transforming curricular delivery and the critical identity of teacher as a professional?
- What is the impact of academic service learning on the interactions between students and community members?

- How can classroom action research support collegiality and professional development?
- What are the impacts of academic service learning and collaborative action research for creating democratic communities within our classrooms, schools, communities, and the world of the 21st century?

Relevance

Ultimately, the goal of our partnership and our investigations is to make the world of schools and thus, the school's world a more just and democratic place to live, love, and work. The pedagogy of academic service learning in K-12 and in college settings have the potential for changing how we view ourselves as learners and teachers and how we function in and out of schools. The addition of the collaboration between K-12 and university educators creates another dimension for change and growth while opening doors for unanticipated opportunities for the democratization of schools. When we recognize ourselves and our colleagues as professionals rather than technicians, we gain the critical identity as true agents for reform in our schools and communities. Collaborative action research and academic service learning are the two roads whose convergence create a broad avenue for creating and affirming our place as professionals, learners, and leaders in educational reform.

Results

The results of this project are preliminary in that only the primary researchers have had the opportunity to examine the large amount of data collected over the past two years. Member checking and an outside audience is being pursued to consolidate our findings. (Lincoln, & Guba, 1985). However, themes are emerging under each of the

four research foci. Some of these themes will be seen to overlap and the edges between them begin to blur. This is to be expected in this type of research.

- The transformation of curricular delivery and the critical identity of the teacher as a professional can be seen to be quite profound but also very straightforward. In terms of curricular delivery, in the case of this Technical Arts/Playground project, the middle school students were up and out of the school building to plan, design, and work with community experts to build the playground adjoining their school. They had a real and vital purpose to which to apply their newly learned skills. These behaviors cut down on passivity of learning and disciplinary problems so common at the middle school level. In addition, the teacher was elevated in her own mind and in the view of the community as a professional leader. This is not a subtle shift. The professionalism of the teacher is enhanced through increased energy and level of commitment, an enhanced standing in the local community, an end to teacher isolation in the classroom, and the adoption of the role of Teacher-Researcher. "At the heart of the professionalism that teacher research offers is respect for teacher knowledge" (McKenna, 1999, p.22). When that knowledge is respected and recognized, the teacher's workload becomes lighter.
- As commented on above, the students' classroom and out of classroom work became relevant and immediately applicable. An auxiliary benefit of this type of school-community collaboration is that the students were able to interact in meaningful, and respectful ways with adults who were not their parents or teachers. This healthy co-mingling towards a common goal had benefits for the students and the community members. Students showed maturity, responsibility, and a strong desire to produce a

good product. Some community members made comments along the lines of not being "put off" anymore by the thought of working with someone thirteen years old. Stereotypes on both sides dissolved.

- The act of engaging in collaborative/classroom action research clearly supports collegiality and professional development on the part of all professional participants. The middle teacher in this project is a true collaborator with the university faculty member in that she works with my students on campus and I work with hers in the middle school. In addition, the teacher is publishing and presenting her experiences and findings to local teachers, and state and regional professional organizations. As teachers and their students become involved in the advancement of educational practices, we all become better teachers and learners.
- The potential for gains in academic achievement and social issues surrounding the use of academic service learning and collaborative action research is enormous. To support students, teachers, and school communities, who are engaged in these activities, we need to provide the time, and funding for on-going, self-selected professional training for our teachers and administrators. Democratic communities come about as a result of all participant voices being heard and considered towards a common, shared goal. As the complexity of our teaching/learning situations continue, it is assured that we need the 'blossom, bud and fruit' of every participant as we strive to be constructive in the 21st century.

Conclusion

In a project of this scope, it is possible that the findings will always be preliminary as each finding leads to another question, in a very biological and dynamic

fashion. Some of our findings in this case were surprising, such as the amount of involvement our community partners wanted to have with the schools and the development of the project. But most of the initial findings seem to follow along lines of the principles of good practice and collaboration. A continuation of this project will be to create a list of what variables need to be in place for the success of a collaborative program between a university faculty and students, K-12 faculty and students, and the community in which they all live. In the meantime, there seem to be three 'truths' upon which we can agree: 1) the effectiveness of authentic learning settings, experiences, and problem solving for all learners; 2) the need for empowerment for our students, teachers, and community members in the development and democratization of local schools; and 3) the continued need for reflective research in the areas of academic service learning and collaborative action research as two roads to profound and lasting educational reform.

References

Anderson, G.L., Herr, K. & Nihlen, A.S. (1994.). *Studying your own school: An educator's guide to qualitative practitioner research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.

Lincoln, Y.S. & Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry.* Newbury Park CA: Sage Publications.

McKenna, M.J. (1999). Classroom action research. *Montana State Reading Journal, 15,* (2), 22-24.

Wade, R.C. (Ed.). (1997). *Community service-learning: A guide to including service in the public school curriculum.* Albany, NY: SUNY Press.